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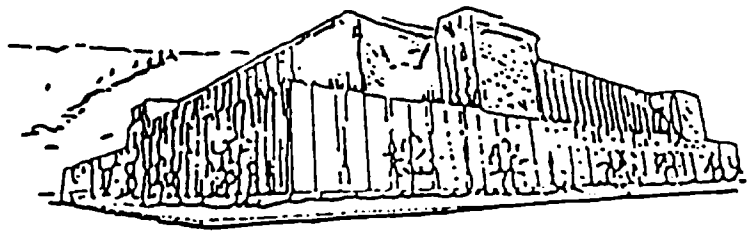
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THE DEATH OF THOMAS FRANCIS MEAGHER REVISITED

by

Angela Faye Thompson

B.A. The University of Montana, 1990

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

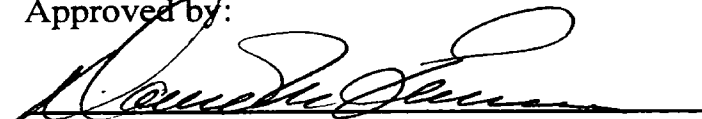
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Master of Arts

The University of Montana

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The Death of Thomas Francis Meagher: Revisited

Director: David M. Emmons, Ph.D. 

Thomas Francis Meagher led a short colorful life. He was born in Waterford, Ireland. He was an Irish revolutionary, an escapee from Tasmania, an influential speaker, a United States Civil War General, and the Acting Governor of the Territory of Montana.

On July 1, 1867, Thomas Francis Meagher fell, jumped or was pushed off a steamboat. He was presumed dead. His body was never recovered. This thesis explores various hypotheses of what happened to Meagher. It suggests murder as a possibility. It explores the Vigilante movement, and it explores Anti-Catholicism in nineteenth century America. This thesis intends to add to the historical record and should lead to new historical research on Meagher's death as well as his world.

PROLOGUE

On the night of July 1, 1867 a body dropped into the Missouri river from the steamer G.A Thompson. After the dark figure hit the water, the Captain of the boat John T. Doran heard a short cry, followed by a long agonizing one. Someone yelled "MAN OVERBOARD"...¹

The dark figure was the Irishman Thomas Francis Meagher, acting governor of the Montana Territory and a leading figure in the Irish uprising of 1848. He died that night. His body was never recovered. Only three explanations exist to explain what happened to Meagher: his death was an accident, a suicide, or a homicide.

Over the years, several stories have emerged about Thomas Francis Meagher's death. Prominent historians, such as Robert Athearn, K. Ross Toole, and Clark Spence, expressed the sentiment that Meagher fell off the boat and drowned.² Athearn did mention that some people thought that Meagher had been another victim of whiskey. Elliot West, another prominent Western historian, claimed that Meagher was walking

¹ W.F. Lyons, Brigadier-General Thomas Francis Meagher: His Political and Military Career; With Selections from His Speeches and Writings (New York: D. & J. Sadlier & Co, 1886), 351-357.

² Robert G. Athearn, Thomas Francis Meagher: An Irish Revolutionary in America (1959; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1976), 165; Clark C. Spence, Territorial Politics and Government in Montana, 1864-1889 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 48; K. Ross Toole, Montana: An Uncommon Land (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1959), 107.

around on the deck in the dark, tripped over a coiled rope, and plunged into the Missouri River.³

Others disagreed with this notion. One contemporary source, Wilbur Fisk Sanders, actually thought that Meagher had become deranged and that he committed suicide.⁴ Another historian, Joel Overholser, in his book, Fort Benton: World's Innermost Port, claimed that Meagher fell overboard after a night of heavy drinking. Overholser stated that one Ferd Roosvelts, a Wells Fargo Agent, backed this story in 1923 claiming he was an eyewitness to the incident.⁵

Francis Bardanouve, a long time Montana resident, Harlem rancher and former Montana legislator, feels that most of the people in Fort Benton view Overholser's theory as correct. Although Bardanouve thinks it a foolish notion, he said that many of Meagher's friends believed that British agents had assassinated Meagher after discovering him in Fort Benton.⁶

The notion that British agents would murder somebody in cold blood is not as farfetched as it sounds. In 1988, the British secret service murdered three suspected Irish

³ Elliot West, "Thomas Francis Meagher's Bar Bill," Montana the Magazine of Western History 35 (Winter 1985): 23.

⁴ Wilbur Fisk Sanders, "Account of Meagher's Death," September 1884, Society of Montana Pioneers, Manuscript Collection (MC) 64, Montana Historical Society, Helena, Montana. All manuscript collections and small collections in this thesis may be found at the Montana Historical Society (MHS), Helena, Montana.

⁵ Joel Overholser, Fort Benton World's Innermost Port (Helena: Falcon Press Publishing Co, Inc., 1987), 63.

⁶ Interview with Francis Bardanouve, Harlem, Montana, Author's notes, 11 June 1997.

Republican Army members in Gibraltar in broad daylight. One of the suspects was shot twenty-seven times. Witnesses claimed the suspects were attempting to surrender but to no avail.⁷ The British government is capable of such action today as well as over a hundred years ago. The British could have seen Meagher as a potential long range threat. As will be seen, he was also, at least in the eyes of the British government, an escaped felon and a fugitive from Van Dieman's Land.⁸

Curiously no historians have explored Meagher's death even though the literature on his tenure as the acting governor of Montana is extensive. Many people from reporters to politicians to priests from 1867 to about 1920 speculated that Meagher's death was not accidental, indeed that it was murder.

The public - or at the least the mass media - was sometimes overzealous in its speculations over what happened to Meagher the night of his death. For instance, in 1961 a story appeared in the Great Falls Tribune that was definitely far-fetched. The headline read: "Helenan Claims He Saw the Body of General Meagher". John Archibald Longmaid, only eleven years old in 1887, claimed he saw the body of Meagher with a bullet through his skull. He insisted at the age of seventy-four that it had to be the General. It not only looked like him but it was of the same height.⁹

⁷ "Quis custodiet ipsos custodes? (Gibraltar inquest into deaths of 3 IRA members)," The Economist, September 10, 1988: 70.

⁸ Bardanouve interview.

⁹ "Helenan Claims He Saw the Body of Meagher," Great Falls Tribune, 4 October 1961: 5.

Longmaid was not even born when Meagher died. He assuredly would not recognize Meagher. Besides, the likelihood of someone dragging Meagher's body around is slim. Although the validity of the story is questionable, a reputable paper did publish it. The fact remains, even after so many years, there was still a lively interest in what happened to Meagher.

In this thesis, I want to explore both Meagher's death and the various explanations for it and to suggest the possibility that he may have been murdered. It should be noted that the existing evidence is only circumstantial because any physical evidence has long since been lost. In addition, this paper should be viewed only as a contribution to the historical debate over Meagher's death. It does not attempt to prove he was murdered. It only attempts to show that the explanation that he was drunk and/or fell off the boat and drowned or that he committed suicide are not the only plausible ones.¹⁰

Thomas Francis Meagher was born on 23 August 1823 to an Irish merchant in County Waterford, Ireland. He belonged to an upper middle-class Irish-Catholic family. He received an excellent education, attending Stonyhurst at first, followed by the Jesuit College at Clongowes Wood.¹¹ He was a gifted speaker. In fact, his speech shaped his character as well as his life.

The Ireland of Meagher's youth was in rough shape. By the time Meagher reached his early twenties, the potato famine had struck Ireland. It absolutely devastated the

¹⁰ Overholser, Fort Benton, 63.

¹¹ Athearn, Meagher, 26.

population. The English turned their backs on the problem. They feared that the Irish were using the funds sent to the famine victims to finance a revolution. Their ignorance cost many of the Irish their lives. The famine permanently changed Ireland's face. Many of the Irish fled to America to escape the harsh reality that the famine brought. Between 1847 and 1854 over 1,180,000 emigrated to the United States.¹²

Meagher saw his country deteriorate before his eyes. As a young idealist he wanted to liberate Ireland from British colonialism. His young mind was filled with unrealistic goals and aspirations. He was a member of Young Ireland, an organization focused on using direct action in order to achieve Irish independence.¹³

Meagher hated England. He hated her for the control she had over his country. He admired the Americans because they had cut their ties with the English. Even when Meagher attended school at Stonyhurst, he refused to recite a poem that celebrated England's victory at Waterloo. He carried that hatred with him when he joined the Young Irelanders in 1846. By that time, the talk of revolution was everywhere in Ireland. He gladly joined the conversation. His hatred for England fueled his speeches against her. In order to understand Meagher one must understand where Meagher and other rebel leaders formed their opinions.¹⁴

¹² R.A. Burchell, The San Francisco Irish, 1848-1880 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 1.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

One reason that the Irish hated the British stemmed from the Parliamentary Act of Union of 1800. The Act dissolved Ireland's parliament. From that time forward, the Irish sent representatives to the English parliament, more specifically, the House of Commons. Until 1829, those representatives could not be Catholic. The Irish wanted the act of union repealed. By the 1840's, Irish political leaders were seriously discussing the issue.¹⁵

Daniel O'Connell, a lawyer, was the acknowledged leader of this repeal movement. He was one of the first to convince the Irish Catholics of their ability to obtain modern political power.¹⁶ He fought for a separate Irish parliament throughout his political career, but not everyone in Ireland agreed with his methods. Some people believed his methods were not extreme enough, or at least that they were too conciliatory to England. Thomas Francis Meagher was one of those people.¹⁷

For a time, Meagher and his friends, Smith O'Brien, John Mitchel, M.J. Barry, and Michael Doheny, joined O'Connell. They named their portion of the Repeal Association Young Ireland. O'Connell, however, would soon alienate the Young Irelanders. O'Connell wanted Repeal. He had already secured Emancipation of the Catholics in 1829. The Repeal would create an Irish House of Parliament. The Young Irelanders wanted more than simply the repeal of the Parliamentary Act of Union of 1800. They wanted complete

¹⁵ Robert Kee, The Most Distressful Country, vol. 1 of The Green Flag (London: Quartet Books, 1972), 154.

¹⁶ Robert Kee, Ireland: A History (London: Sphere Books, Ltd, 1982), 66.

¹⁷ Kee, Most Distressful, 154.

liberty from England.¹⁸ While O'Connell and the Young Irelanders debated over the ideological points of how to liberate Ireland, millions of Irish peasants were dying of starvation in the Irish countryside.

Another issue that divided the revolutionary Young Irelanders from O'Connell was the use of force. O'Connell believed that in most cases political victory was not worth the shedding of blood.¹⁹ The Young Irelanders agreed in principle that Repeal should be obtained peacefully; however, to say they would never use force was inappropriate. Furthermore, Daniel O'Connell's son, John O'Connell only worsened the conflict with Meagher and his associates. The Young Irelanders considered him an "insolent little frog" because he was a power monger, did not listen to their views and his only true interest lay in taking over his father's place.²⁰ The Young Irelanders and Meagher were in direct conflict with the young O'Connell.²¹

On July 28, 1846 Meagher added to the division with his most famous speech. It earned him the title, Meagher of the Sword. He explained that to use force against a government was sometimes necessary. With unrelenting passion, he sounded off to appeal to his fellow countrymen's emotions.

...I do not disclaim the use of arms as immoral nor do I believe it is the truth to say that the God of Heaven withholds his sanction from the use of

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid. , 253.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

arms...Be it for the defense, or be it for the assertion of a nation's liberty, I look it upon the sword as a sacred weapon. And if, my lord, it has sometimes reddened the shroud of the oppressor, like the anointed rod of the high priest, it has, at other times, blossomed into flowers to deck the freeman's brow...Abhor the sword or stigmatize the sword?...²²

Meagher also reminded the English that their defeat in America could perhaps be repeated in Ireland. The English ignored this speech as frivolous rumbling. At the time of the Sword speech, the English were not overly concerned with Meagher's words. Later, however, as revolutions spread across Europe like wildfires on a hot windy day, the English became more concerned with any speech that could inflame the Irish population. Meagher's use of the word "battle" was a particular source of concern for the English.

Certainly they did not take Meagher's next speech so lightly. In fact, the following words almost cost him his life. The date was 15 March 1847 and Meagher was unequivocal.

...if the union is to be maintained against the will of the people, if Ireland is to be governed through the instrumentality of dragoons, then up with the barricade and invoke the God of Battles...²³

After this speech, the English arrested Meagher for sedition and libel. A jury decided that not enough evidence existed to convict Meagher. The jurors concluded that Meagher's words would not inspire the Irish to revolt. Despite the jurors' findings, the English remained suspicious of Meagher. In the summer of 1848 when skirmishes against English soldiers erupted in Ireland, they moved against him.

²² Ibid. , 254.

²³ Athearn, Meagher, 8.

The events leading to Meagher's second arrest were somewhat bizarre, in the sense Meagher was not involved in a true battle or, for that matter, involved in a true revolution. The "battle" was only a skirmish and it was a revolution only in talk not action. Smith O'Brien, an upper class Protestant who became one of the most prestigious of the Young Irelanders, was joined in the town of Ballingarry by several would-be revolutionaries, including Meagher.²⁴ Meagher had spoken to the miners of the town. He asked them to prepare for a revolution that would occur within three weeks' time. Young Ireland's revolutionary "council" could not decide whether to fight the English at that moment or to wait until the crops were harvested. O'Brien particularly wanted to fight the English immediately. The council did not conclude the argument. However, it did continue without great success to rally support. The fact remained, the people were more concerned about their next meal than a revolution.²⁵

Just the same, despite an apathetic and starving populace, a skirmish did break out between the police and the locals in Ballingarry. Someone started to throw stones; the police, feeling nervous for obvious reasons, fired a series of volleys. Two Irishmen were killed. Several were wounded.²⁶ The English decided enough was enough. They sent in masses of troops to find the revolutionaries. Meagher himself was arrested on the road

²⁴ Kee, Ireland, 104.

²⁵ Kee, Most Distressful, 283.

²⁶ Ibid.

after spending several nights hiding in ditches. He had spent other nights in the homes of starving Irish peasants. This time, the English were not inclined to be lenient.²⁷

After one month of incarceration, Meagher's trial began on 21 September 1849. Although the crown had a weak case, the members of the jury found Meagher guilty of treason. They sentenced him to die by hanging on 16 October 1849.²⁸ In an attempt to avoid further conflict and to maintain some semblance of peace, the judge decided to suspend Meagher's and his fellow rebels' sentences. Instead of hanging, he banished them to the penal colony in Van Dieman's Land, present day Tasmania, for life.

Van Dieman's Land was a harsh place. John Mitchell, one of Meagher's fellow inmates, referred to the culture of Tasmania as a small bastardized England. He reminded his readers: "... the legitimate England itself is not so dear to me that I can love the convict copy..."²⁹ Many convicts spent years trying to escape and many convicts died in the process. Skeletons of the escapees filled the outback.³⁰ In the Fatal Shore, his history of Australia and Tasmania, Robert Hughes, explained that the Irish were often the first to try to escape. The Irish inmates believed that there was an escape route from Van Dieman's Land to China through the Australian outback. In China, they would be free

²⁷ Ibid. , 286.

²⁸ Athearn, Meagher, 10.

²⁹ Robert Hughes, The Fatal Shore: The Epic of Australia's Founding (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), 590.

³⁰ Ibid. , 203.

from the clutches of England. Sadly, many died in the attempt to make this myth a reality.³¹

Meagher did not love the "convict copy" either. After a year of confinement he persuaded his captors to grant him a "ticket of leave". The ticket allowed Meagher to move about Hobart, the town in which his prison was located, somewhat freely. He also had the freedom to marry within the community if he chose. Authorities still watched him and they did restrict his movement. He did not appreciate the officials' presence. Although he had just married Catherine Bennett for both physical and intellectual companionship, his thoughts turned to escape.³² He became determined to flee his prison and go to America because he knew it was no longer feasible for him to return to Ireland. A plan occurred to Meagher to make his dream a reality. He stowed himself away on a fishing boat without the knowledge of his pregnant wife. He lived on bird's eggs until he was picked up by the captain of the Elizabeth Thomas, Captain Betts. The ship brought Meagher to Pernambuco, Brazil. From there, hidden in the last bag of sugar on the brigantine, The Acorn, Meagher made his way to the United States, arriving in New York April 23, 1852.³³

³¹ Ibid. , 204.

³² Athearn. Meagher, 223.

³³ Ibid. , 26.

CHAPTER I

Meagher's America

In 1852, Meagher would find an American society influenced partially by the teachings of the Protestant Church. Meagher was a proud Catholic. Later in life, he would promote the settling of Irish Catholics in the newly formed Montana territory. He would discover that many Americans would not like his ambitions.

Anti-Catholic sentiments had a long history in the United States and in the American colonies. Ray Allen Billington in The Protestant Crusade 1800-1860 : A Study of the Origins of American Nativism notes the anti-Catholic movement originated from some of the preconceived notions the Protestant colonists brought with them from England. They viewed the Pope and Catholicism as enemies. This idea remained with the colonists through the seventeenth century. Feelings of anti-Catholicism continued through the eighteenth century and became an even more dominant fixture in America in the nineteenth century. By the 1850's, anti-Catholicism ranked with Anti-slavery as one of the key issues of politics in the Northern states. In fact, with the influx of immigrants and the growing fear that the newcomers would dominate politics, the nativists decided to remind their voters of the evil threat the Roman Catholic Church brought to the republic. They decided the best means to do so was through the use of the ballot box.³⁴

Why was the issue so prevalent? Perhaps it had something to do with how Americans viewed America during this time period. Some people considered America as

³⁴ William E. Gienapp, The Origins of the Republican Party (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 121. Gienapp also noted that Ruthford B. Hayes saw the ballot box as a way for people to show their hatred for Roman Catholics.

a stronghold for Protestants. They believed their settlement of America and their success there was sanctioned by God. The idea of Catholicism taking root in America appalled most "native" Americans:

...If proof...was needed, Protestants only had to look to California. For God had hidden the gold of that region beneath the soil so as long as Popery dominated there, only to reveal its presence after annexation by the Protestant United States had opened the way to the conversion of seekers after wealth.³⁵

The idea that Americans discovered gold because of their faith only added to the prejudice that America could only be the home of Protestant believers, not Catholic ones.

The Know Nothing Party, the first political party to use anti-Catholicism as part of its platform, emerged in 1854 from a secret organization called the Order of the Star Spangled Banner. In order to be a member of the Know-Nothing Party one had to meet the following criteria: be twenty-one years of age, believe in God, be a native-born Protestant American, be raised a Protestant, and never marry a Catholic. One Know Nothing summarized the issue: "[In order to protect our country, we will hire only those not under] ...the insidious policy of the Church of Rome, and [avoid] all other foreign influences against the institutions of our country, by placing in all offices...whether by election or appointment, none but native-born Protestant citizens."³⁶

Even though the Know-Nothing Party denounced all immigrants, it especially hated Irish-Catholics. Some Americans in the nineteenth century viewed the Irish much

³⁵ Ray Allen Billington, The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism (New York: Rinehart & Company, Inc., 1952), 280.

³⁶ Tyler Anbinder, Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know-Nothings and the Politics of the 1850's (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 23.

like bigots view many minority groups today. Many of their ideas sprang from ignorance of Irish culture and its religious beliefs. The Irish were definitely stereotyped and as a result discriminated against.

In Paddy and the Republic Dale Knobel discussed in depth the stereotypes the Irish were laden with in the nineteenth century. These ideas were reinforced by the influx of English reading material and by people's own experiences. Many nineteenth century Americans were exposed to the Irish, who had just immigrated from a famine stricken nation; most were poor and determined to survive. They took jobs that most "native" Americans thought beneath them.³⁷ The Irish were considered bad characters. They were blundering fools, bad humored and full of vices.³⁸ The Irish were "illiterate, uneducated, degraded and depraved."³⁹ They were also considered superstitious drunkards who could not be trusted. Basically, people thought the Irish-Catholics would never make good American citizens.

The nineteenth century American citizenry viewed itself as a people with strong characters, as hard workers and above all virtuous. They did not see the Irish as having these qualities. These Americans saw the Irish or anyone who did not fit the above criteria as a danger to their Republic. One Cincinnati magazine editor, Joseph Reese Fry, expressed this attitude this way:

³⁷ Dale Knobel, Paddy and the Republic: Ethnicity and Nationality in Antebellum America (Middleton, Conn., Wesleyan University Press, 1986), 43.

³⁸ Ibid., 47.

³⁹ Ibid., 130.

Ignorance is the poison of a republic and no citizens are really desirable save those who are well informed ...Republics always tend strongly to radicalism - they always have their demagogues who excite the passions and the prejudices of the ignorant, that they mislead them to their own advantage...One man of bad moral character, no matter how ingenious he may be, will do more injury to a country than a thousand spinning jennies will do good.⁴⁰

This attitude implied only American born Protestants, who grew up in America's unique environment, could obtain virtue and anyone else who did not fit this description would "poison the Republic."⁴¹ The Irish did not fit the formula.

Others had an explanation of why the Irish did not fit well into America. One anti-Catholic publicist wrote "their low culture, their squalid poverty...all the results of the despotism of their priests."⁴² These attitudes only added to the Know Nothings' political power, because the nativists feared the Democratic Party's control over Irish and other immigrant voters. The natives also feared the Irish attachment to the Catholic Church. The natives saw the Irish as a threat to their own church and their own political power. Their solution was to establish a Know Nothing Party that would defeat the Democrats by voting against anyone or any issue that favored Catholics voters. The New York Tribune wrote why it thought the Know-Nothing Party was successful.

...the Know-Nothings command and use of the strongest prejudices of Yankee nature--the hatred of Paddies and hatred of Popery. Combining these with enough anti-Slavery principle to make it difficult to attack them from the anti-Slavery side , and also with the Maine principle law

⁴⁰ Ibid., 48.

⁴¹ Anbinder. Nativism and Slavery, 51.

⁴² Ibid. , 131.

[temperance] they have been victorious over the parties which offered only as a single issue or unpopular issues.⁴³

Consequently, the power of the Know-Nothing Party divided the country. It added a third party to the America's two party system. In the 1850's, the two dominant parties were the Democrats and the Whigs. The Know Nothing Party divided the Whigs by splitting their vote. Many members of the Know Nothing Party were once Whigs. The Whigs lost most of their political power during this time, and by 1860, they were no longer contenders in the political ring. In most cases when one political party fails, another party must exist to take care of the political vacuum its loss creates. The Know Nothing Party was not strong enough after 1854 to take on such a role. But another would be, one that is more familiar to the ears: the Republican/Union Party.⁴⁴

The Republicans, unlike the Know-Nothings, wanted to emphasize to their voters that they were anti-Catholic, but downplay the idea that they were anti-immigrant. The Republicans emerged during a time when Catholic behavior was under strict scrutiny. One incident seemed to upset nativists more than anything else. In 1851 President Franklin Pierce appointed John Campbell, a Catholic, to the Postmaster Generalship of the United States. The nativists within the Whig Party as well as nativists within the Democratic Party itself were outraged. "If they continue to appoint Catholics, "one angry

⁴³ Ibid. , 192.

⁴⁴ David Potter, The Impending Crisis, ed. and completed by Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1976), 239.

Philadelphia Democratic party member argued, "...the party...as large as it is...will cave in."⁴⁵ Others threatened: "The Irish influence must and will be put down."⁴⁶

One of the reasons Irish-Catholics and other Catholics turned to the Democratic Party was because many Catholics did not perceive that they had any other option.⁴⁷ The Democrats were already having political problems because of the anti-slavery issue and the dominance of Southern Democrats in Congress. People began to identify the Democratic Party as the Popery and Slavery Party much to the Northern Democrats' chagrin.

In the book, The Origins of the Republican Party, William E. Gienapp summarized the parties stance this way: "The Republican Party projected an anti-Catholic image, a fact readily perceived by nativists and Catholic voters alike."⁴⁸ The Republican Party decided to focus on two issues: anti-Slavery and anti-Catholicism. These two issues spelled success in the 1850's. The Republicans had victory within their reach but they failed. Their failure was directly connected to their nomination of John C. Fremont as their presidential candidate in 1856.

In fact, Fremont would seem to be an unlikely candidate for the Republican Party. His greatest attribute was simply that he was famous. Tales of his exploration of the West were told throughout the United States and its territories. Fremont was a

⁴⁵ Gienapp, The Origins, 94.

⁴⁶ Ibid. , 95.

⁴⁷ Ibid. , 423.

⁴⁸ Ibid. , 367.

Southerner by birth, only forty-three years old and the least politically experienced nominee that the Republicans could have picked.⁴⁹ He had even served under the Democratic banner while he was in California.⁵⁰ At first, Fremont was doing an outstanding job as their presidential nominee. He was attractive to voters. Disaster then struck. Rumors surfaced he was Catholic.

The Republicans wanted desperately to attract the Know Nothing vote. They could not do so if their own nominee was a Catholic. In Washington D.C., the Republicans went out of their way to claim he was a Protestant. Another serious mistake occurred when the Boston Atlas, a Republican paper, printed a copy of the dispatch that supported the allegation Fremont was Roman Catholic.⁵¹ The allegation was not unfathomable. Fremont's father was a French Catholic and Fremont had attended a Catholic school. Suddenly, nativists were demanding proof positive that Fremont was not Catholic. The Republicans even published the records of his children's Episcopalian baptism to try to dispel the rumors.⁵² It was not enough. Fremont never publicly denounced the accusation. The taint never left. The nativists held onto the rumor like a bull dog holds onto a fresh bone. They never let the issue go.

Many of the Republican Party's founders believed this accusation cost them the election. Other Republicans blamed the onslaught of Irish-Catholics who voted. The

⁴⁹ Ibid. , 316.

⁵⁰ Ibid. , 317.

⁵¹ Ibid. , 368.

⁵² Ibid. , 369.

New York Courier and Enquirer blamed Fremont's defeat on the following: "Irish bog-trotters, with necks yet raw with a foreign priestly yoke."⁵³ The Buffalo Morning Express was just as insulting when this comment appeared regarding the Irish Catholics:

...[They] pour out on election day in herds and droves, no creature thinking for himself, but like sheep following their leader, away they go pell mell altogether, just as their own may direct.⁵⁴

The Republican Party was careful whom it appointed to office from this point forward. Not once did it nominate a Catholic. Even Catholics with strong anti-Slavery backgrounds were denied nominations in the Party.⁵⁵ The Republican Party would not cater to the Catholic vote.

In this political atmosphere, Meagher found himself in the bustling town of New York. Immigrants arrived daily, but Meagher was considered special. He was an Irish hero. Meagher was famous for his speaking ability, in fact he was nicknamed Meagher of the Sword after his famous 1846 speech. The Irish were proud of the man who escaped England's clutch. The Irish-Catholics of the city greeted Meagher with a hero's welcome. Other Americans criticized the celebration. They asked their fellow citizens why they would applaud the arrival of a known felon. Meagher ignored the verbal attacks against

⁵³ Ibid. , 427.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid. , 421. Although a controversial statement, Gienapp does make this accusation in his book.

him. Perhaps in the back of his mind he wondered why he was being attacked. For now, he had better things to do, like trying to find a way to make a living in this new country.⁵⁶

He soon found a way. He decided to make money by doing what he did best--speaking to the public. After this decision, he decided to send for his wife and son. Tragically, his son, Henry Emmet Fitzgerald had died of influenza at the age of four months before Meagher notified Catherine of his whereabouts. Catherine had made her way to Waterford, Ireland and then attempted to join Meagher in America. She was in ill health and returned to Waterford where she died at the age of twenty-two on May 9th, 1854.⁵⁷ After receiving the news of Catherine's death, Meagher barely had time to mourn because by June he had found himself a new love. He wrote of Elizabeth Townsend, a lady from a rich Eastern family: "She is so beautiful, so intelligent, so cultivated, so generous, so gentle and unaffected."⁵⁸

Despite his affectionate, beautifully written letters to Elizabeth, love, as before, could not keep Meagher settled nor could he stay away from politics, his true love. He started a newspaper called The Irish News to keep his mind occupied. He watched as America divided itself between the defenders of the Union in the North and the defenders of slavery and secession in the South. During the debates, he sided editorially with the South. Meagher did not believe the North could preach about the abolition of slavery and

⁵⁶ Ibid. , 35.

⁵⁷ Photograph of headstone, St. John's Church and Cemetery, Richmond, Tasmania. Note and photograph provided by Dr. Harry Fritz.

⁵⁸ Athearn, Meagher, 50.

still treat the Irish laborers as cruelly as it did. To Meagher, Northerners were hypocrites because they would not admit to discrimination or to the bad treatment of Northern workers.⁵⁹

Some Northerners reacted to Meagher's criticism by alluding to the fact that Meagher was an escaped felon. Meagher, his feelings and his pride hurt, considered leaving the United States and returning to Van Dieman's Land.⁶⁰ But he soon forgot the insult and turned his attention to other challenges.

Meagher correlated challenge with adventure. He solicited President Buchanan for a consulship in either Central or South America. Not receiving an appointment, Meagher traveled to Central America anyway. The trip provided him with several new ideas and more material to fascinate his audiences with in his lectures. He visited Panama first and then he embarked for Costa Rica. He visited San Jose. Meagher wrote extensively about the architecture; he was especially fascinated by the white-washed walls on buildings. Meagher described the people in San Jose as lazy and listless. He attributed the characteristics in connection with the humid weather. Meagher criticized the government of Costa Rica. He wrote to Judge Charles P. Daly: "[They are] irresponsible and armed with a constitution fatal to liberty."⁶¹

Meagher thought his Central American trip could lead him to a political appointment as an ambassador from the United States. The ambassadorship would

⁵⁹ Ibid. , 56.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid. , 76.

provide him a steady income to support Elizabeth. His speeches did not provide him with enough money to support them and his pride did not like the idea of his father-in-law providing for them.⁶² Hence, Meagher continued to seek government appointments throughout his life.

The Costa Rica constitution was not his only interest. Meagher saw opportunity in Costa Rica for the United States. He supported the idea of connecting the Atlantic and Pacific oceans via rail through Costa Rica. The U.S. Senate, however, disagreed. Meagher realized his influence was limited and even with foreign experience, his desire for a railroad and a consulship were both doomed. So he returned to New York.⁶³ In the meantime, the United States edged towards war as the tension between the North and South heightened.

Meagher realized he had a chance to fight in a real war when the conflict between the North and the South escalated. He leaped on the opportunity. Although his sympathies were originally with the South, he reversed himself when he learned that England was considering the idea of supporting the Confederacy. Meagher, filled with war fever just like most of the country, actively recruited Irish immigrants to form the 69th Irish Brigade.⁶⁴ Many nativists in our country believed that Irish-Catholics would not fight for America or even their own cities. Facetiously, one critic commented: "[The Irish] rally at the call of the Bishop and the Priest. They are the soldiers of the Church of

⁶² Ibid. , 140.

⁶³ Ibid. , 86-87.

⁶⁴ Ibid. , 118.

Rome, bound to defend its interests at whatever peril, and not the citizens of Boston."⁶⁵

Meagher would prove them wrong because they did fight gallantly for the Union. Many Irish died in the defense of the Union. Meagher's dream was to take his troops to Ireland to free his country from England's grasp forever.⁶⁶ That dream, however, would never become a reality.

Training briefly, Meagher soon engaged his troops at the first major battle of the war--what the North called Bull Run and the South Manassas. Although this battle disgraced the North, Meagher's troops fought bravely. Meagher, encouraged by their success, decided he would continue to lead troops for the Union cause.

Just after the 69th's brave fight, Congress appointed Thomas Francis Meagher to the rank of Brigadier General. Meagher was proud of his rank, and the idea the war would continue only added to his pleasure that he would have a chance to prove himself in battle again.⁶⁷ His success, however, would be limited. Disaster struck the Irish Brigade at Chancellorsville in 1863 where, it lost 102 men out of 520.⁶⁸ The Union loss was great: 17,000 men died that day. Fighting Joe Hooker would carry the burden of the loss since he was in charge of the Union Army at Chancellorsville. Filled with a sense of misery and failure, Meagher tendered his resignation. Meagher left because he could no longer find satisfaction in taking young men into that bloody war.

⁶⁵ Anbinder, Nativism and Slavery, 110.

⁶⁶ Athearn, Meagher, 8.

⁶⁷ Ibid. , 134.

⁶⁸ Ibid. . 135.

Meagher could not stay idle. At the urging of an old friend, Michael Cavanaugh, Meagher considered joining the Fenian Association, a group of Irishmen who wanted to fund an Irish led rebellion from America to drive the English out of their homeland.⁶⁹ Meagher's membership was brief as he turned to Washington D.C. in attempt to renew his military career. The hope was short-lived. No one wanted to give Meagher a second chance. One may speculate that even though the tragedy at Chancellorsville was not Meagher's fault, military commanders are generally held accountable for such extreme losses and this thought may have deterred politicians from giving Meagher a second chance. Also, the political winds were not in his favor due to the dominance of Republicans in office. Moreover, the disaster at Chancellorsville still weighed heavily in the minds of the politicians in charge. Abraham Lincoln had said of Chancellorsville: "My God, my God what will the people say."⁷⁰

The war for Meagher was over. On July 4, 1865, people gathered for a parade honoring the Irish Brigade. Meagher walked on the sidelines dressed in civilian attire "with smarting eyes".⁷¹

After the parade, Meagher decided to search for another opportunity for adventure. Meagher asked President Andrew Johnson to appoint him governor of the Idaho territory. Turned down, Meagher immediately sought another office in the same area. Johnson

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ken and Ric Burns, prod. , "Simply Murdered, 1863," Episode #4, The Civil War, Episode #4, Florentine Films and WETA TV, 1989.

⁷¹ Athearn, Meagher, 142.

offered him the secretaryship of the territory of Montana; he accepted the offer without hesitation.⁷²

Although Meagher had been in the West when he visited California, he knew very little about the new territory of Montana. He decided, however, that Montana would be a good place for Irish Catholics to settle for its small population and its promise of wealth due to the discovery of gold. He wrote a letter to Archbishop Thomas L. Grace explaining why the Montana territory would be a great place to settle.⁷³ Meagher also stopped in Minnesota to inform the Minnesota Irish Emigration Society that he intended to colonize Montana with Irish-Catholics.

Catholic colonization was an idea the Church promoted in the 1860's and 1870's. Either Archbishop Thomas L. Grace or Father John Ireland originally conceived the idea.⁷⁴ They focused their recruiting efforts on the Midwest especially Minnesota. They encouraged the Irish to take up farming and for the Irish to get away from the crowded cities. The Catholic Church in the east did not support their endeavors. It was promoted more though after Father Ireland had returned from his wartime duties. For the most part the Minnesota venture failed. Meagher's idea that the Irish were more suited for the

⁷² Ibid. , 145.

⁷³ Ibid. , 46; David M. Emmons, The Butte Irish: Class and Ethnicity in an American Mining Town, 1875-1925 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 61.

⁷⁴ James P. Shannon, Catholic Colonization on the Western Frontier (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 44. Shannon wrote about the failure of Catholic Colonization in the Midwest. The attempt, however, was a gallant effort to improve the life of the immigrant, to give him a chance to escape the crowded cities of the east. The gold rush in the West would provide more jobs than the farms of the Midwest.

colonization of Montana was actually better, even though he did not know the reason at the time. Many Irish from Cork and other areas had useful mining skills that Montana needed. They were far more advanced in their technical knowledge of mining than their technical knowledge of farming.⁷⁵ After a lengthy speech to the Minnesota Emigration Society, Meagher continued his journey to Montana.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Emmons, Butte, 55. Many of the immigrants from Ireland were hard rock miners. The mines of the West needed their experiences and skills so they were often hired over other immigrants.

⁷⁶ Athearn, Meagher, 144.

CHAPTER II

Montana and Meagher's Life and Death There

Abraham Lincoln created the territory of Montana on May 26, 1864. Covering ninety-two million acres, the territory contained vast plains to the east and mountainous terrain in the west.⁷⁷ Native Americans, fur trappers and a few Jesuit priests populated the vast region.

Montana, though, was about to change forever. In 1862, gold was discovered in Grasshopper Creek, more popularly known as the Beaverhead diggings.⁷⁸ No one is positive who first discovered gold in Montana, but the 1862 discovery did set the gold rush in Montana into motion.⁷⁹ In the early years, two towns sprouted from these discoveries, Bannack and Virginia City, both of which played key roles in Montana history. The discovery of gold transformed Montana's wilderness into a makeshift civilization. The gold rush created an instant society with all the saloons, rabble-rousing, and crime to go with it. Laws were often simply ignored; the man who was the best pistol or rifle shot was in charge. Disappointed miners from California and Colorado flocked to

⁷⁷ Spence, Territorial Politics, 4.

⁷⁸ Thos. J. Dimsdale, The Vigilantes of Montana or Popular Justice in the Rocky Mountains (Virginia City, Montana: Montana Post Press, D.W. Tilton and Co., 1865), 19. Dimsdale was good friends of Wilbur Fisk Sanders and he believed that the Vigilantes were heroes.

⁷⁹ Michael P. Malone, Richard B. Roeder, and William L. Lang, Montana: A History of Two Centuries (Seattle: University of Washington Press, revised edition, 1991), 64.

Montana to seek their fortunes or in some cases just to escape the War Between the States.⁸⁰

By no means, however, had these early Montana gold seekers and other entrepreneurs forgotten about the Civil War raging in the southeast. The politics of the territory churned with the animosities between Southerners and Northerners, Democrats and Republicans. The war even affected how cities were named in the new Montana territory. Professor Thomas Dimsdale, the editor of the Montana Post and a Radical Republican, recalled that Virginia City was named in reference to the Civil War. Ironically, it was not called Virginia City to support the South. Originally, the city was named Varina after Jefferson Davis' wife. Dr. G.G. Bissel, a staunch Yankee, the first person to write an official document in the new city was asked to head the document with the name Varina.⁸¹ Bissel cussed "he would d---d them first." Thus, in a legal document, Bissel changed the name to Virginia after his own wife. Apparently, Bissel forgot what side of the war Virginia the state had placed herself. In any event, the North appeared to have the upper hand in the newly settled city.⁸²

The naming of Virginia City only touched the surface of the deeply rooted animosities that existed between the Northern and Southern immigrants who settled in Montana. The conflict had a partisan dimension that pitted Republicans against

⁸⁰ Dimsdale, Vigilantes, 18.

⁸¹ Ibid., 62. Helena Fitzgerald Sanders had referred to him as a Yankee. See Helen Fitzgerald Sanders, A History of Montana (Chicago and New York: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1913), 63.

⁸² Ibid., 62.

Democrats as well as a cultural one that involved "native" Americans and European immigrants.

The tone of territorial politics was set when Abraham Lincoln appointed the Radical Republican Sidney Edgerton as the Montana territorial governor. Edgerton was a former Ohio congressman who originally traveled West to become the Chief Justice of the Idaho territory. Realizing the immensity of his task, Edgerton persuaded Lincoln to create Montana. As a result, and quite suddenly, Edgerton found himself in charge. Edgerton was a Radical Republican who did not like the Democratic Party at all. He once referred to former President James Buchanan, a Democrat, as an "imbecile"⁸³ and he was adamant in his belief that all legislators, even those serving in the territorial legislature, had to take the Iron Clad Oath. The oath made them swear that they had "never borne arms against the United States of America."⁸⁴ Edgerton's attitudes and his political stance guaranteed that the War Between the States would continue in Montana politics.

Another Radical Republican to affect the shaping of territorial politics was Edgerton's nephew, Wilbur Fisk Sanders. Sanders was born in Cattaraugus County, New York on May 2, 1834. His parents were devout Methodists. Sanders became an expert theologian. He enjoyed studying the Bible in school and he followed his parents' religious guidance explicitly. Later, Sanders fought briefly in the War between the States leading an Artillery unit belonging to the 64th Ohio Infantry. He fought at Pittsburgh

⁸³ Malone et al., Montana, 99.

⁸⁴ Ibid. The Iron Clad Oath was intended for men serving in the Congress of the United States.

Landing. Soon after, Sanders resigned due to a physical disability. He needed a career change. He saw his opportunity with his uncle, the newly appointed Chief Justice of the Idaho territory. Sanders came to Montana in order to practice law. He ended up supporting his uncle in creating the territory of Montana because the Idaho territory had become too vast for anyone to control.⁸⁵

Sanders decided to practice law in Bannack and after for only a few months realized that Virginia City was a better place to establish his practice. He moved there in 1862. James S. Brisbin, a promoter of Montana,⁸⁶ in his tribute to Sanders described him as awe-inspiring, stating that he was: "Tall, lank and of powerful build with a clear ringing voice and piercing black eyes, he was the very personification of dignity and courage."⁸⁷ Sanders was a skilled lawyer. Sanders saw Montana as his opportunity to excel as a lawyer and as a statesman.

Sanders was a staunch Republican (Union) Party man. He was considered "the republican war horse of Montana".⁸⁸ In fact, he attempted to run as the territorial delegate to Congress in October of 1864. He overwhelmingly lost the election to one Sam

⁸⁵ Ibid., 94.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 155.

⁸⁷ James S. Brisbin, "Biographical sketch: 'Romance of a life of senator...'" Wilbur Fisk Sanders Papers (WFS.), 1856-1930, MC 53, Box 1, Folder 1. MHS. Brisbin was a Montana author and promoter of Montana. He wrote a book to promote the eastern rangelands called The Beef Bonanza; also called How to Get Rich on the Plains. See Malone et al., Montana, 155.

⁸⁸ Joaquin Miller, The Illustrated History of Montana (Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1894), 956.

McClean, a Democrat, who supposedly drank a barrel of whiskey a day. These cold election results reminded the Republican Party it was still a minority in the mining camps of Montana.⁸⁹ This election was an example of the turbulence Montana would feel between Democrats and Republicans through the nineteenth century into the twentieth.

Sanders was the First Grand Master of the Masons in Montana, an organization steeped in secrecy.⁹⁰ It was also an organization with a history of having members who were sympathetic to the Anti- Catholic and pro-nativist cause.⁹¹ Sanders understood that Virginia City and Bannack were a far cry from the "civilized" cities of the east. Sanders, Dimsdale and others like Sam T. Hauser wanted the territory to be ruled with law and order.⁹² The government had not established a court system in the territory that worked, at least in Sanders' eyes. So Sanders decided to form a group that would take the law into its own hands.

⁸⁹ Malone et al., Montana, 99.

⁹⁰ "Extract from the Minutes of Virginia City Mason Lodge" [1876], WFS., MC 53, Box 6, Folder 10. Sanders apparently liked to preside over groups. On March 25, 1865 the Montana Historical Society was founded. Wilbur Fisk Sanders was the President of the Society from 1865-1873. Granville Stuart was elected secretary. Michael A. Leeson noted this fact in his book The History of Montana 1739-1885: A History of its Discovery and Settlement, Social and Common, Illustrated. (Chicago: Warner, Beers and Company, 1885), 371.

⁹¹ John Higham, Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925 (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1955), 5, 80.

⁹² Brisbin, "Biographical sketch," WFS., MC 53. MHS.

Sanders became the head of the Vigilance Committee of Montana. The Vigilantes were all members of the Union Leagues.⁹³ They had no sympathy for Southerners or their sympathizers. Ironically, the majority of the miners and the settlers were either Southerners or strong Democrats.⁹⁴ Sanders no doubt used his Masonic connections to recruit men to his vigilante cause.

The connection between the Masons and the Vigilance Committee was somewhat vague. One of the great mysteries in Montana Vigilante lore was the use of the symbol 3-7-77. This number is currently the symbol of the Montana Highway Patrol. In his article, "The Fateful Numbers: 3-7-77 A Reexamination" Rex C. Myers told his readers that four hypotheses exist that explained the symbol: first, it symbolized the number of hours, minutes, and seconds the outlaw had to depart the area, second, it was the dimensions of a grave, and third, it came from either the California or Colorado Vigilantes representing the numbers of the members who could authorize executions and burials, and last, it represented a Masonic code.⁹⁵ The Masons used this code to call a meeting. A. G. Mackey An Encyclopedia of Freemasonry and its Kindred Spirits explained that three and seven were significant in the Masonic lodge, one needed three to make a lodge and one needed seven to make it perfect. Supposedly, seventy-seven Masons originally lived in the Montana territory. William H. Bell had suddenly died of mountain fever on

⁹³ Robert Athearn, "The Great War Muddies the Mountain Waters: The Civil War and the Montana Gold," Montana the Magazine of Western History 2 (Spring 1962): 69.

⁹⁴ Spence, Territorial Politics, 9.

⁹⁵ Rex C. Myers, "The Fateful Numbers: 3-7-77 A Reexamination," Montana the Magazine of Western History 4 (Autumn 1974): 67.

November 12, 1862. Before his death, Bell told a friend he wanted a Masonic burial. The friend did not think the Masonic burial would occur for lack of Masons in the territory. Seventy- six of his masonic comrades attended his funeral. They adopted seventy-seven as a symbol to remember Bell's spirit.⁹⁶

In 1929, Montana Supreme Court Justice Lew L. Calloway, claimed the Vigilante-Masonic Connection did not exist.⁹⁷ Thomas Dimsdale, the editor of the Montana Post never connected the Masons and the Vigilantes either. Yet Calloway contradicted himself in his own papers. He claimed nine of the ten original organizers of the Vigilantes were Masons.⁹⁸ Apparently, he did not want the fact to become public knowledge since he made the statement in a Masonic lodge setting. The connection between the two organizations is stronger than it appears since Wilbur Fisk Sanders was a Mason and the President of the Vigilance Committee.⁹⁹

Professor Thomas Dimsdale wrote a detailed account of the Montana Vigilance Committee covering the early years of its existence from 1862-1864. He explained that the Vigilance Committee had resolved to rid the territory of all miscreants and any other person not fit to live in this newly established mining community. According to

⁹⁶ Ibid., 70.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 69.

⁹⁸ Judge Llewellyn L. Calloway, Address delivered by Llewellyn C. Calloway, Past Grand Company [Masonic Lodge] on June 8, 1938, Judge L.L. Calloway Papers, Small Collection (SC) 213. MHS.

⁹⁹ "Extract from the Minutes of the Virginia City Mason Lodge, WFS., MC 53, Box 6. Folder 10. MHS.

Dimsdale, the good people of Montana supported the acts of the Vigilantes.¹⁰⁰ Dimsdale saw good people as anyone who belonged to the Republican Party and who supported the Union fully. He considered any Democrat to be a "disloyal rebel."¹⁰¹ To Dimsdale, the political and social situation was clearly and cleanly cut in half: "There are but two parties in this republic--patriots and traitors."¹⁰² In fact, he even went as far as to say that the Democrats would vote for Satan himself if he appeared on their ticket.¹⁰³

Many stories exist regarding what happened during the Vigilante years. Dimsdale's account is the most contemporary. He gave his readers a thorough examination of the criminals, what they did and how the Vigilance Committee "tried", convicted and hanged each and everyone of them. Dimsdale stressed that the people the Vigilance Committee hanged were the dregs of society. He also explained that the Vigilantes were civil in carrying out of their duties unlike the mobs who went after criminals without any humane consideration at all.¹⁰⁴

In one account, Dimsdale described in detail what happened to one unfortunate criminal who was not lucky enough, as Dimsdale saw it, for the Vigilantes to have hanged him instead leaving him to a mob. The problem I had with the following scene and Dimsdale's defense of the Vigilantes is they allowed this act to occur without

¹⁰⁰ Dimsdale, Vigilantes, 130.

¹⁰¹ Malone et al. , Montana, 98.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Dimsdale, Vigilantes, 133.

repercussions. The account is actually grotesque. Joe "The Greaser" Pizanthia had wounded Smith Ball in the hip and George Copley in the chest. When Copley died, Ball desperately wanted revenge. Ball and his associates chased Pizanthia down finding him held up in a local cabin. Using "extra force", Ball and Copley's friends, fired a howitzer at the cabin believing Pizanthia was hiding in the chimney. The howitzer dislodged him. Ball then fired six rounds into him and then Ball and his comrades strung the body of the dead "greaser" with a clothesline. They then fired a hundred rounds into his swaying corpse. One would have thought carnage would have ended there but it did not. Dimsdale continued the story explaining someone in the crowd suggested that Pizanthia should be "fried in his own grease."¹⁰⁵ This description followed:

A proposition to burn the Mexican was received with a shout of exultation. The body was hauled down and thrown upon a pile which it was burned to ashes so completely that not a trace of bone could be seen when the fire burned out.¹⁰⁶

Dimsdale argued that unruly passion produced this type of carnage. The Vigilance Committee prevented these scenes from occurring on a regular basis. They did not punish the people who murdered Pizanthia in such a grotesque fashion. Dimsdale continued in his glorification of the Vigilantes: "The truth is, that the Vigilance Committee simply punished with death men unfit to live in any community , and that death was, usually, almost instantaneous, and only momentarily painful!!"¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 132.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 133.

The idea the Vigilantes allowed Pizanthia to die this way sends me warning signals. Did Pizanthia's death go unavenged because he was a Mexican? Two other cases to me suggest that the Vigilantes of Montana were most likely prejudiced and that their justice was not necessarily blind.

One case comes to mind where ethnic background may have played a role in Montana Vigilante justice. John Keene in his makeshift trial argued why he killed Harry Slater. Keene pleaded: "My honor compelled me to do what I have done."¹⁰⁸ Keene claimed Slater had made his life miserable. He had chased Keene from town to town. Slater had yelled obnoxiously: "There is the Irish---he has not left town yet." Miserable, Keene shot him.¹⁰⁹ Dimsdale claimed that the story had no validity and that Slater had not spoken to Keene at all before Keene shot him. Dimsdale claimed Keene willingly went to his death.¹¹⁰ It is odd that none of the people Dimsdale spoke of fought for their lives. According to him they all willingly submitted to Vigilante justice. He also painted the picture that all the criminals were substandard and any defense they had was a lie.¹¹¹ These stories imply that the Vigilantes were prejudiced against people who did not fit their description of what made a good citizen.

Another story perhaps has more meaning. Dimsdale was not fond of Southerners. Boone Helm was the criminal Dimsdale most hated because he was a traitor. When Helm

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 202.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 202.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 204.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 133.

went to his death in the Vigilantes he yelled before his neck snapped: "Every man for his principles--hurrah for Jeff Davis! Let her rip!"¹¹² The question remains was Helm hanged for committing murder or for his support of the Confederacy. In Dimsdale's mind it was for murder.

Dimsdale's support of the Vigilantes was one hundred percent. They could do no wrong. Dimsdale blamed liquor for the criminals' actions and the lack of good Christian women in the territory to control the men.¹¹³ Dimsdale continued with stories of how the Vigilantes took justice into their own hands.

Keene's and Pizantia's stories did not make the Vigilantes famous, but the capture and the hanging of the Plummer Gang did.¹¹⁴ The Vigilantes initially became a force in society because of their reaction to Henry Plummer and his gang. Henry Plummer was a seducer; he was a very polite and pleasant man who had an evil streak in him as wide as Alder Gulch itself.¹¹⁵ In 1862, he managed to be elected to the office of sheriff in Bannack.¹¹⁶ It was perfect. With the law on his side, he could commit crimes without being suspect. In the summer of 1863, Deputy Sheriff D.R. Dillingham, an honest man, was murdered. Plummer's friends, Buck Stinson, Haze Lyons and Charley Forbes were guilty of Dillingham's unfortunate death. A miner's court convicted Buck

¹¹² Ibid., 144.

¹¹³ Ibid., 8.

¹¹⁴ Malone et al. , Montana, 79.

¹¹⁵ Dimsdale, Vigilantes, 218.

¹¹⁶ Malone et al. , Montana, 79.

and Haze. It sentenced them to hanging. But, with crowds of weeping women, the court reversed its verdict and released the criminals.¹¹⁷ Plummer and his gang continued as road agents robbing, pillaging and murdering as they went. Over one hundred murders are credited to the Plummer Gang.¹¹⁸ The Gang had to be stopped.

The Vigilance Committee of Montana, based on the California model, was established on the 23rd of December 1863. The members of the committee took an oath, wrote by-laws and formed a series of regulations to control the committee.¹¹⁹ Supposedly, over two thousand men became vigilantes to list in the cause to fight criminals. The numbers 3-7-77 became their warning as well as their signal of recognition.¹²⁰

The Vigilance Committee sought out the road agents. George Ives was the first to hang; his hanging on 21 December 1863 set the Vigilante Committee into motion. Systematically, the following criminals were hanged for their misdeeds: Eratus "Red" Yager and G.W. Brown on January 4, 1864, Henry Plummer, Ned Ray, and Buck Stinson on January 10, 1864, Clubfoot George Lane, Frank Parish, Haze Lyons, Jack Gallagher and Boone Helm on January 14, 1864, Steve Marsland 16 January 1864, William Bunton 19 January 1864, Cyrus Skinner, Alexander Carter and John Cooper 24 January 1864, and William "Whiskey Bill" Graves 26 January 1864. Dimsdale also listed John "Dutch John"

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 79.

¹¹⁹ Myers, "The Fateful Numbers," 68.

¹²⁰ Malone et al., Montana, 80.

Wagnor and Joe Pizanthia even though the Vigilance Committee did not rid the world of them according to Dimsdale's own account.¹²¹

In the 1880's, Sanders once bragged to the Commercial Gazette in Washington D.C. : "As you know, I was the chief of the vigilance committee, and we successfully engineered about forty or fifty hangings..."¹²² People applauded the Vigilantes for a job well done. J.J. Boyer and W.J. Boyer in "...the Early Days of Alder Gulch" complimented the Vigilantes work of 1863: "...law and order prevailed, and thanks to the Vigilance Committee who unselfishly endured hardships and risked their lives to attain an end, life and property were perfectly safe."¹²³ Five of the Plummer Gang's graves can still be found apart from any others on boot hill overlooking the town of Virginia City. Cold, weathered crosses mark their graves, a reminder to all who visit there of the deeds of the Vigilantes in the not so distant past.¹²⁴

Thomas Dimsdale wrote his book to defend the Vigilantes and dispel any rumors that they did not carry out justice properly.¹²⁵ Thomas Dimsdale's book was running in the Montana Post when Thomas Francis Meagher arrived to take his secretarial seat. Thus, Meagher arrived in a territory filled with hidden rivalries and political uneasiness. The

¹²¹ Dimsdale, Vigilantes, 21.

¹²² "Political dates vary," WFS., Box 5, Folder 7, MC 53. MHS.

¹²³ J.J. Boyer and W.J. Boyer Reminiscence, "In the Early Days of Alder Gulch...", 1863, SC 1545. MHS.

¹²⁴ Author's view after visiting Virginia City in the summer of 1991.

¹²⁵ Dimsdale, Vigilantes, 3.

Republicans and the Vigilantes had laid the groundwork to retain political power. The Democrats did not see the power structure in the same way.

The Montana Post was the first territorial newspaper. On September 9, 1866, Dimsdale announced that the "illustrious Irishman" would soon arrive in the territory. Dimsdale complimented Meagher for fighting on the side of the Union. He wrote: "That persuasive eloquence that held spell bound both Celt and Saxon is on the side of the right, and will be used to reclaim the wanderers from the Union fold."¹²⁶ Dimsdale perceived that Meagher would remain loyal to the Union politically because he had fought for the Union cause. Dimsdale did not differentiate between Republican Party loyalty and loyalty to the Union.

Thus, Thomas Francis Meagher arrived in a divided territory with the welcome mat laid out for him by Dimsdale's Radical Republican newspaper. Perhaps the Montana Republican Party did not realize what Meagher's political beliefs truly were. When Thomas Francis Meagher arrived he was introduced to Wilbur Fisk Sanders. Sanders, like Dimsdale, no doubt hoped that Meagher would remain a Union man.

Meagher had left the east disgruntled with the Democratic Party. He severed his ties with the party over a solitary issue. With sorrow, Meagher explained why he was leaving the party he belonged to since his arrival in America:

...black heros of the Union Army have not only entitled themselves to liberty but to citizenship and the Democrat who would deny them the

¹²⁶ The Montana Post (Virginia City), 9 September 1865. Professor Thomas Dimsdale was the editor of The Montana Post. His paper supported the Republican Party view in Montana.

rights for their wounds...is unworthy to participate in the greatness of the nation.¹²⁷

The Democratic Party, however, was also not happy with Meagher either. He had made enemies when he chose to fight for the Union cause. Some Irish members of the Party thought Meagher joined to gain military fame for himself.¹²⁸

Nevertheless, after very little time in Montana, Meagher found himself once again leaning toward the Democratic Party. Athearn had wrote that Meagher had "swung his sympathy with the local Republicans to an all out support of the territory's Democratic inhabitants."¹²⁹ Sanders must have been disappointed. Then to make matters worse, Sidney Edgerton, the governor of the territory departed abruptly. Edgerton had been in a precarious situation. Without a territorial secretary, no federal funds could be issued. The secretary was the only person authorized to sign federal warrants. Edgerton had funded some of the territory's expenses with personal funds simply because before Meagher's arrival the territory lacked a secretary. With Meagher's arrival Edgerton left for Washington, D.C to talk about Montana. He planned first to stop and take care of some personal business. In his haste, Edgerton forgot to request a leave of absence. Apparently, the administration thought he had abandoned his post. Besides President Johnson hated Edgerton's radical views; Edgerton was forced to resign.¹³⁰ Suddenly,

¹²⁷ Athearn. Meagher, 145.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 142.

¹²⁹ Lewis W. Hunt, "More Layers on a Hoary Legend: Thomas Francis Meagher, The 1913 Hoax," Montana the Magazine of Western History 2 (Winter 1962): 62.

¹³⁰ Malone et al. , Montana, 100.

Meagher found himself acting governor of the Montana territory. It would be a while before another governor would be appointed because Congress was concentrating on reconstruction.

At first, Meagher agreed with the Republicans and Judge Lyman E. Munson, a member of the territorial Supreme Court and a Radical Republican, that an acting governor could not call a legislative session. Soon, Meagher found that not calling a session was impractical and, as a man of action, he called one in spite of the protests from the opposition.¹³¹ Meagher and the Democrats dominated the legislature and they chose to ignore the court's guidance. The Radical Republicans were outraged, and they no doubt thought they had been betrayed. Meagher was not the professed Union man that the Republicans thought he was. In reaction, Radical Republicans and the state judges protested the legislature to Congress. In February of 1867, Congress declared the second in 1865-1866 and the third in 1866-7 sessions null and void because it decided Meagher did not have the authority to run the session.¹³²

Clark Spence, in Territorial Politics and Government in Montana 1865-1889, reminded his readers that Meagher was an opportunist. Spence believed that Meagher foresaw that the Democratic Party would eventually dominate politics in Montana. In likelihood, Meagher realized most of the Democrats in the territory were Irish, and Meagher always put the Irish first in everything he did. Also, the majority of the

¹³¹ Spence, Territorial Politics, 37.

¹³² Malone et al. , Montana, 102.

territory's population was either Southern or was sympathetic to the Southern cause.¹³³ Meagher himself understood these feelings having sympathized with the South prior to the war.¹³⁴ Meagher criticized the Republican Party for attacking and punishing the South after the war. He blamed United States' internal problems on the Republicans' bitterness.¹³⁵

Meagher, in charge, soon discovered he had enemies or at least unfriendly competition. Meagher's first confrontation involved the Vigilantes. James B. Daniels, a dangerous criminal or an outstanding citizen depending on your point of view, managed to shoot and kill a man over a card game in a Helena saloon in March of 1866.¹³⁶ The Vigilantes considered hanging Daniels right then and there. Instead, they decided to allow the newly established court system to determine his fate. The courts found him guilty of murder and sentenced him to three years in prison. Thomas Francis Meagher, the new acting governor, received several letters from concerned citizens claiming Daniels did not deserve such a fate.¹³⁷ From the letters, Meagher decided to pardon Daniels and to release him after only three weeks in prison.¹³⁸

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Athearn, Meagher, 56.

¹³⁵ Spence, Territorial Politics, 37.

¹³⁶ Athearn, Meagher, 151.

¹³⁷ James B. Daniels Papers, Folder 1, SC 1634. MHS.

¹³⁸ Athearn, Meagher, 151.

Judge Munson wanted the acting governor to cancel the pardon Meagher had issued Daniels. Meagher refused. Munson then ordered the arrest of Daniels, ignoring the governor's pardon completely. The judge hired federal marshals to look for Daniels to arrest him.¹³⁹

Daniels, however, was not about to slip quietly into the shadows with the acting governor's pardon. Instead, he rode to Helena and attempted to intimidate the witnesses who had testified against him in court. It was a costly mistake. Athearn, in his biography of Meagher, wrote: "With the Governor's pardon still in his pocket, he was immediately suspended by the neck from a tree. When he was cut down, a note was found pinned to the back of his coat which read: 'If the acting governor does this again, we will hang him too.'"¹⁴⁰ Athearn continued to say the Vigilantes had openly threatened Meagher's life.¹⁴¹

Meagher had clearly upset men in the higher echelons of government and these men may have been Vigilantes. The Vigilantes, as a result reestablished themselves for they did not trust the leadership in the territory.¹⁴² The threat may have only reenforced Meagher's determination that he would not be told how to run the territory by anyone.

Threatening an acting governor is a rather serious crime. A bitter rivalry between the territorial judges and Meagher erupted after the affair. The threat did not seem to

¹³⁹ Michael A. Leeson, The History of Montana, Illustrated (Chicago: Warner, Beers and Co. , 1885), 303.

¹⁴⁰ Athearn, Meagher, 151.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 155. See also. Hunt, "More Layers," 31.

¹⁴² Martha Edgerton Plassman Papers. 5 June 1927. Box 3, Folder 16, MC 78. MHS.

faze Meagher. He was not about to give in to bodily threats. Perhaps surviving Tasmania as well as Chancellorsville made the Vigilantes' threat less formidable to him. Daniel's hanging or the Vigilante's threat did not stop Meagher from making decisions that his political opponents disliked.

The next issue to surface where Meagher's opinion differed from his counterparts was over the common school system. Thomas Dimsdale had noted in the Montana Post that the law to create the common school system already existed in the territory. He wrote: "The people of Montana have a good school law, and ample provision for its effective working. Shall this become useless for good, by lying dormant? or shall the energy of the people give the dry bones life?"¹⁴³ The common school system referred to the Protestant based school system that existed in most states, and public tax funds supported the school. Only the King James version of the Bible could be referred to in school, and any teaching from the Roman Catholic Church was prohibited. Apparently, Meagher disagreed with Dimsdale's idea of that system. Within two weeks of the threat Meagher received from the Vigilantes, Meagher fired Dimsdale from the position of the Superintendent of Public Instruction. As Meagher put it in his report to the territorial legislature: "Dimsdale was relieved by me from that office for having failed to make a report in compliance with the request of the executive for the information for the legislature."¹⁴⁴ Dimsdale was not Meagher's friend.

¹⁴³ Montana Post, 9 September 1865.

¹⁴⁴ "Incoming Correspondence from acting Governor Meagher." 20 March 1866, The Territorial Legislative Records. Box 1, Folder 16. MHS.

The possibility exists that Meagher fired Dimsdale over a sectarian issue. Within a month after Dimsdale's dismissal, Meagher vetoed a bill concerning the common school system. Meagher usually explained in detail why he rejected a bill. Meagher also explained that he did not think the Superintendent of Public Instruction had the right to decide what could or could not be taught in school. He wrote the legislature:

I disapprove of this bill, moreover, for the reason that it does not authorize the Superintendent of Public Instruction to exclude from the public schools of this Territory any sectarian tracts or other publications having to excite discord upon religious subjects. Nor, does it empower him to prevent and suppress sectarian instruction, in which the world knows, teachers of every religious denomination are apt and prone to indulge.¹⁴⁵

The common school system was a thorny subject across the nation as well as in Montana. First and foremost this particular issue upset nativists in this country and in the Montana territory more than any other. Bringing the school issue up was like adding dry grass and wind to an already burning forest. This issue in the eastern half of the United States had actually caused riots. Catholicism was still considered an evil, and it was by no means the favored religion. The school issue only added to the conflict between nativists and the Catholic immigrants that came to the United States in the nineteenth century.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ "Executive Office of Montana April 1866," Thomas Francis Meagher Papers, Box 1, Folder 1, SC 309. MHS. It is important to note that the Vigilantes supported the Republicans in this arena. The San Francisco Vigilance Committee of 1856 supported the move toward Protestant based schools. See Robert M. Senkewicz, S.J., Vigilantes in Gold Rush San Francisco (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1985), 144-154.

¹⁴⁶ Anbinder, Nativism and Slavery, 24.

In Baltimore, the First Plenary Council of Catholic Bishops met and denounced the common school system as irreligious. The Roman Catholic Church decided in 1852 that it needed parochial schools or Church schools that taught Catholic doctrine instead of Protestant doctrine. It also wanted state funds to support the parochial school system as well as the common school system.¹⁴⁷ The reaction of the nativists to the council was like a wind gust on a stormy night. The Philadelphia Sun explained the sentiment of Anti-Catholic bigots best. "Are American Protestants to be taxed for the purposes of nourishing Roman vipers?"¹⁴⁸

The issue went even deeper. The Catholic Church was also reacting to the teaching of the King James version of the Bible in school throughout the United States. In 1854 in Ellsworth, Maine, Father John Bapst told the children of his parish not to read the King James in school. Not long after his advice was given, Catholic vandals broke into the school and burned all the King James Bibles they could find. The Protestant members of the school were outraged. In turn, they tarred and feathered Father Bapst and drove him out of town. The results of the vandalism did not help the Catholic cause.¹⁴⁹

The event only convinced more Protestants that the Catholics planned to overthrow their common school system. The outcome convinced more Protestants to join anti-Catholic organizations.¹⁵⁰ One also must realize the Protestants saw the common

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 125.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

school system as the core of American traditions. The attack was seen as an attack on American republicanism itself. In turn, Protestants stressed the use of the King James Bible in school and they also taught what they considered Protestant ethics. In other words, they stressed that the Protestant Church had played a key role in United States history and it represented science and enlightened thought. The Catholic Church, on the other hand to the Protestants was viewed as reactionary and filled with superstition.¹⁵¹ Massachusetts went so far as to require children to read the King James everyday--just to snub the Catholics who fervently protested.¹⁵² The Roman Catholic Church suggested that maybe the best solution was not to teach religion in school at all. The nativists promptly rejected the idea.¹⁵³ Consequently the issue of religion in the common school system remained a political issue -- an issue Meagher clearly understood.¹⁵⁴

Meagher saw Montana as a place where Irish-Catholics could settle. He may have thought the Irish could avoid the school and issues that plagued Catholics in the East. Meagher, as a informed Catholic, feared that if this common school bill passed in Montana, the Protestants would dominate the school system with their ideals, a notion that occurred to many Catholics in nineteenth century America. Therefore, the

¹⁵¹ Gienapp, The Origins, 60.

¹⁵² Anbinder, Nativism and Slavery, 135.

¹⁵³ Gienapp, The Origins, 60.

¹⁵⁴ "Executive Office of Montana, April 1866." Thomas Francis Meagher Papers, Box 1, Folder 1, SC 309. MHS. Meagher's veto of the school bill showed the people he was aware of the national issues concerning the common school system.

possibility existed that Catholic children would become alienated from their heritage.¹⁵⁵

Meagher wanted to remind them of the struggles the Irish still faced against the British in their homeland, and he still wanted a chance to free his fellow Irishman.¹⁵⁶

Neither Meagher's dismissal of Dimsdale nor his veto of the school bill made him popular with his political opponents. Dimsdale was obviously not Meagher's best friend. He was a Radical Republican and a clear political supporter of Wilbur Fisk Sanders, Dimsdale's vigilante hero. Dimsdale and Sanders disagreed with the way Meagher handled his inheritance of the territorial governorship. They could not see a Democratic Catholic Irishman as their leader, especially one who had betrayed them; they had thought Meagher was firmly an Union man.

Meagher and Sanders were in constant disagreement over how the territorial government should be run. Sanders and his followers thought the acting governor had no right to call the legislature. Meagher thought differently. He saw calling the legislature as a necessity to keep the territorial government from becoming ineffectual. Basically, decisions had to be made. Sanders and his counterparts disagreed because they did not have the majority in the House. The assembly and the legislation that occurred there was in shambles. James L. Thane in his thesis: "Thomas Francis Meagher, 'The Acting One'" wrote of Montana's territorial government:

¹⁵⁵ Emmons, Butte, 61. Meagher showed his concern for his Irish heritage with his interest in Catholic colonization.

¹⁵⁶ Athearn, Thomas, 8. Meagher probably never let go of the idea to free Ireland.

Much of that confusion resulted, however, because of Sanders and the Republicans who did everything in their power to keep Montana in a state of anarchy and confusion because they could not control its government.¹⁵⁷

Basically, Sanders managed to convince Congress to throw out the two legislative sessions Meagher had conducted, claiming it was illegal for an acting governor to call elections and to call a legislature into session. Meagher understood that one could not even receive a divorce because the territory had not called a legislature to form laws to govern and perform basic daily functions. Sanders bitterly denounced Meagher and the Democrats, all of whom were "reacting with treason" because they were not supporting the Radical Republican lead in the Congress of the United States. Meagher did not apply the Iron Clad Oath because it did not apply to territorial or state legislatures. Sanders, no doubt, wanted the Oath enforced to prevent Southern Democrats and Southern sympathizers from having any say in the territorial politics. Sanders probably perceived any one not willing to take the oath as a threat. Meagher, on the other hand needed the support of all Democrats. Meagher, in turn wrote to the President that Sanders, who was headed to Washington, was "...the most vicious of my enemies."¹⁵⁸ According to Spence, Meagher continued calling Sanders: "...an unrelenting and unscrupulous extremist."¹⁵⁹

Sanders was agitated with Meagher. On the 14th of February 1866, he wrote a letter in frustration to James Fergus. Fergus was a fellow Republican. He was a

¹⁵⁷ James L. Thane, Jr., "Thomas Francis Meagher: 'The Acting One'" (M.A. thesis, University of Montana, 1967), 89.

¹⁵⁸ Spence, Territorial Politics, 37.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

Scotsman, who spent his early years in Montana as the first recorder of election results. He was considered an honest and fair man.¹⁶⁰ Sanders and his followers were upset over the lack of support they were receiving from Meagher. The legislature itself, the firing of Dimsdale and the school issue all were factors in Sander's dislike of Meagher. Sanders wrote to Fergus that he imagined Meagher would give up. He stated: "and I can see a gentleman in the not so far future reflecting how completely he is played out and wondering if everyone regards him as the great fool he knows himself to be." Sanders continued to tell Fergus the Montana Republicans would have everything this legislature accomplished thrown out. That task was eventually accomplished.¹⁶¹

The conflict between the North and the South heightened tensions in the Montana territory. Sanders continued in his letter stated: "...and rely on a strong effort of the missionary society(ours) and the schoolmaster to reconstruct us and make us a whole nation of whole men."¹⁶² Sanders reference to the situation could also reflect other issues in Montana like the firing of Thomas Dimsdale. Sanders viewed the common school system as a way to reenforce the values of the Republican Party and a way to support the Protestant Church. Meagher did not agree with the common school system. Sanders

¹⁶⁰ Tom Stout, ed., Montana: Its Story and Biography: A History of Aboriginal and Territorial Montana and Three Decades of Statehood 3 vols. (Chicago and New York: America Historical Society, 1922) 3: 1263.

¹⁶¹ Letter to Mr. Fergus from Sanders, 14 Feb 1866, WFS., Box 3, Folder 5, MC 53. MHS.

¹⁶² Ibid.

finished the letter to Fergus ominously: "...we must put a quietous[sic] on the doings of this pretender."¹⁶³

Another issue to aggravate the political kettle was Meagher's insistence that the territorial government must not support monopolies of any kind. Some of the monopolies the territory supported Governor Sidney Edgerton owned. Others Edgerton supported. The territorial government had chartered the Upper Missouri River Steamboat Navigation Company. Meagher did not see the act as a function of the government.¹⁶⁴ Another issue that really upset Meagher was that the territorial government decided to sell one hundred miles of Mullan Road to private companies. He yelled that the act was illegal and it was "damaging fraud".¹⁶⁵ The idea that Meagher was attacking Edgerton did not enhance his relationship with Sanders. Edgerton was Sanders' uncle. It did not help that Meagher had signed several bills that supported individual people. Besides, Meagher's reaction may have been because the above issue would have benefitted men he saw as enemies.

Some of Meagher's actions made him enemies. But, he also feared they disliked him for other reasons. He thought people disliked him because he was Irish-Catholic. Meagher wanted people to see him as he was, not as preconceived notions dictated what he should be like. In a letter Meagher wrote from Missoula to C.C. O'Keefe he expressed these feelings:

¹⁶³ Ibid. See Spence, Territorial Politics, 39.

¹⁶⁴ Spence, Territorial Politics, 182.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 185.

...I want my countrymen to place me up and beyond the sneers of these "blackguards" who are ever so ready to run down an Irishman, whenever and wherever they have a chance.¹⁶⁶

Meagher lived in a hateful world. He was disliked for his politics and his race. Meagher hated Sanders and his Radical Republican ways. Certainly Sanders was not Meagher's friend. Ironically, though, Sanders would be the one to announce Meagher's death in July of 1867.

The Missouri River, below Fort Benton, meanders its way through a canyon and is not known to have overly aggressive high water at the end of June.¹⁶⁷ In fact, the acting governor should have survived the fall he took from the G.A Thompson, a steamer of at least two hundred tons and carrying twenty passengers.¹⁶⁸ Tragically, the man who survived Tasmania as well as Chancellorsville, died on the early morning of July 1st when he somehow ended up in the Missouri River.

¹⁶⁶ Letter to C.C. O'Keefe, 26 September 1866, Thomas Francis Meagher Papers, Box 1, Folder 2, SC 309. MHS.

¹⁶⁷ Author's view of the river in June of 1997.

¹⁶⁸ Overholser, Fort Benton, 63.

CHAPTER III

Murder on the Hi-Line or Accident: Meagher's Death Revisited

The only fact historians know with certainty about Thomas Francis Meagher's death was that he was never seen again. Many people have speculated what happened to Meagher that night. I plan to discuss the explanations and especially the hypotheses that explore murder in further detail.

Wilbur Fisk Sanders himself wrote a detailed account of what happened the day Meagher died in the papers of the Society of the Montana Pioneers. After arriving in Fort Benton, Sanders claimed he and Meagher wandered around Fort Benton attending several social events. Sanders noted the Irishman did not drink any of the alcohol offered to him. Sanders, in the account, mentioned Meagher was his neighbor in Virginia City and he enjoyed his company. Sanders and Meagher supposedly spent the majority of the day exploring Fort Benton together until Sanders left Meagher to dine with another of their mutual acquaintances.¹⁶⁹

Continuing the account, Sanders claimed Meagher arrived at the G.A. Thompson around dusk. Sanders noted that an Irishman whom he thought was named, "Dolan", owned the boat. "Dolan" questioned Sanders thoroughly wanting to know if indeed that was the famous revolutionary Thomas Francis Meagher. Sanders explained it was. "Dolan" was excited. Meagher, of course, was his idol. Sanders also noted "Dolan" was

¹⁶⁹ Sanders, "Account of Meagher's Death," Society of Montana Pioneers Papers, MC 64. MHS.

full of "blarney".¹⁷⁰ Sanders continued the story mentioning Meagher was not alone , although Sanders could not recall who Meagher was with at the time. In his account, Sanders thought Meagher was acting "deranged". He wrote:

He was loudly demanding a revolver to defend himself against the citizens of Fort Benton, who in his disturbed mental condition, he declared were hostile to him, and several who then joined us sought to allay his fears and by all means in our power to restore sanity to his disturbed mental condition.¹⁷¹

After convincing Meagher he should get some rest, Sanders stopped briefly to speak to someone on the lower deck of the G.A. Thompson. He did not recall who he had spoken with that night when he left the boat. He then proceeded to the office of an Indian agent which was located minutes from the ship on the wharf to send a telegraph. Sanders assured his readers that he did not notice if anyone had remained with Meagher when he left.¹⁷²

Thirty minutes later, Sanders received the news Meagher had drowned.¹⁷³ He believed Meagher had jumped in the Missouri River and committed suicide. Sanders, with deep regret, took upon himself to inform Elizabeth Meagher, Thomas Francis' widow, of the tragedy.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid. Sanders referred to Meagher as well as "Dolan" as Irishmen.

¹⁷¹ H. Sanders, History, 349. This account also appeared in the Butte Miner, 10 June 1913.

¹⁷² Sanders, "Account of Meagher's Death," Society of Montana Pioneer Papers, MC 64. MHS.

¹⁷³ H. Sanders, History, 340.

Meagher's death was tragic. Sanders spoke of the river: "...but the jealous waters guard their secret well, and the rushing waves from unfound springs seem destined forever to be his monument and his grave."¹⁷⁴

The dark waters of the Missouri River became Thomas Francis Meagher's grave. Elizabeth, Meagher's wife, searched fruitlessly for her husband's body, and to her heartbreak it was never found. What really happened the night Meagher died? Was Sanders' correct in his analysis that Meagher committed suicide or was it possible that Meagher was murdered for his political ideals and his Catholic background?

Hugh Quigley, a missionary priest and Irishman, who in 1878 wrote an immigrant's guide to the Northwest and California, The Irish Race in California and on the Pacific Coast detailed where immigrants should and should not go. Quigley thoroughly described the terrain the immigrant would encounter and he even commented on social conditions. It was like a nineteenth century Lonely Planet guide with a few more tidbits for the reader to digest. One of his entries seemed almost out of context, but Quigley apparently wanted his readers to be aware of hidden dangers. Quigley simply stated that the Vigilance Committee of Montana murdered General Thomas Francis Meagher. He wrote what he believed happened that fateful night:

Thomas Francis Meagher of Montana, also set his face, like a globe of steel, against the vigilancemen of that Territory, have declared in public that, while he held supreme authority, no man should be condemned unheard or suffer death after a legal trial. And for this plain and stern declaration his own life was **threatened** by a murderous banditti... the agents of the vigilantes who in the dark hour of midnight...assassinated the

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.. 341.

hero...by stabbing him and flinging his body into the muddy waters of the Missouri.¹⁷⁵

Quigley was not the only one that thought Meagher was murdered by the Vigilantes. David Mack, a resident of Butte also thought the Vigilantes killed Meagher. He claimed they killed Meagher and then hired several discharged soldiers to bury Meagher a mile or so southwest of Fort Benton. The grave, according to Mack was soon covered by rolling Montana sand and dust. He related his story to the Anaconda Standard.¹⁷⁶ Granville Stuart¹⁷⁷, a leader of his own Vigilante group in the 1880's, denounced David Mack. He considered Mack an honest and brave man, but thought he must be senile to make such a statement.¹⁷⁸ The thought the Vigilantes did it was fairly common.

Meagher had received a threat in connection with the Daniels affair. One may also possibly consider Sanders' comment to Fergus that they need to rid themselves of the pretender as a subtle threat. Sanders may not have meant that comment literally. The possibility must raise questions in our minds though. Both Quigley and Mack believed murder was a possibility.

¹⁷⁵ Hugh Quigley, The Irish Race in California and on the Pacific Coast (San Francisco, A. Roman and Co, 1878), 167-8, 543. My emphasis.

¹⁷⁶ Hunt, "More Layers," 33.

¹⁷⁷ Malone et al. , Montana, 163. Granville Stuart headed his own Vigilante group in the 1880's. They were called "Stuart's Stranglers" and they killed at least fifteen men.

¹⁷⁸ Hunt, "More Layers," 33.

In order to make sense of the argument that the Vigilance committee would threaten an acting governor and possibly murder him, one must explore the political and ethical stance of the Vigilance Committee. First, one must realize that the miners of the territory traveled great distances to stake claims. Many men who came to the territory spent time in the mines of California and Colorado. They brought the attitudes of these camps with them. Consequently, the Vigilantes of Montana as well as the Miners Associations of Montana copied their by-laws from California.¹⁷⁹ So, one may derive their attitudes were similar.

Richard Maxwell Brown in Strain of Violence : Historical Studies of American Violence explained that prior to 1856 in California vigilante activity rose and fell with the crime rate. In 1856, this correlation changed and Brown argues this marked the arrival of a classic Vigilante movement in San Francisco. The crime rate in 1856 was low. The Vigilante Movement of 1856 was built with different building blocks. The Movement grew in reaction to the Irish-Catholic faction who controlled San Francisco's government.¹⁸⁰ The members of the committee did not like the people who were in charge of "their" city. Brown describes the movement in these terms:

Political rivalries were often linked to vigilante strife, for, many instances, vigilantes leaders harbored political ambitions and were not above using the movement to further their personal ambitions.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁹ Malone et al., Montana, 80.

¹⁸⁰ Richard Maxwell Brown, Strain of Violence: Historical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 124.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 120.

Instead of horse thieves. Brown argued neo-vigilantism attacked Catholics, Jews, immigrants and the laboring or working class in general.¹⁸² They were especially concerned with those who wanted to organize labor unions. The Vigilantes represented a group fighting for political power. Civil liberties were not their concern, only applying their own type of justice was important. John Nugent, the editor of the San Francisco Herald, for example, expressed the opinion in his paper that he preferred a constitutionally backed court system form of justice over extra-legal Vigilante Justice. His sentiments were not well received. Overnight, the most powerful paper in the city had been totally boycotted.¹⁸³ This story shows us that the Vigilantes in San Francisco were not only powerful but they were also bigots. Therefore, one may conclude that the members of the Montana Vigilantes were also bigots and acted to enhance their political power not to deter crime. Dimsdale, as one recalls, saw only two types of people in Montana, Republicans or traitors. Not many Irish-Catholics could be found supporting the Republican Party. Dimsdale was also inclined to think he had to defend the Vigilantes honor. He wrote:

...in the formation of a tribunal, supported by an omnipresent executive, comprising within itself nearly every good man in the Territory, and pledge to render impartial justice to a friend without regard to the crime, creed, race or politics...¹⁸⁴

¹⁸² Ibid., 170.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 128.

¹⁸⁴ Dimsdale, Vigilantes, 14.

Dimsdale also noted that it was the right of every American citizen had the right to have his property and person protected by justice in a swift and efficient manner.¹⁸⁵ Does that mean if one was not an American citizen, one does not have that right? The Vigilantes also must have been accused of wrong doing or Dimsdale would not have had to bring up the issue of creed and race.

In California, Brown wrote: "Vigilante leadership of the upper and middle class and old American Protestant merchants were aligned against a faction supported by Irish-Catholic lower class laborers." The Vigilance Committee members loathed the laboring class that tended to be made up of Catholic immigrants and Democrats.¹⁸⁶ In Montana, the Vigilante leadership was made up of Radical Republicans, Union men and Masons.¹⁸⁷

The Masonic lodges were known for their prejudicial feelings against Catholics. John Higham in his book Strangers in the Land supports this statement. He explains to his readers that a "devoted Mason", Henry F. Bowers started the American Protective Society or the A.P.A, an extremely powerful anti-Catholic organization.¹⁸⁸ This fact reflects that many Masons carried anti-Catholic ideals. Rex Myer's article supported the idea Masons were involved in the Vigilante movement in Montana. Wilbur Fisk Sanders was a Grand Master of one of first Masonic Lodges in Montana. Brown stated that Masonic lodges provided Vigilantes with the shadowy background they needed to carry out their form of

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 15.

¹⁸⁶ Brown, Strain, 128.

¹⁸⁷ Spence, Territorial Politics, 9.

¹⁸⁸ Higham, Strangers, 80.

justice. Brown's study implied they were only holding up the law if it supported their causes. In Montana, many of the men that the Vigilantes hanged had supported the South, were not natives and were members of the Democratic Party. Was this the real reason these men died? Some of these men were criminals but in other cases the lines were definitely less defined.

Did the Vigilante movement attack only criminals or did it attack people for not having the same values and beliefs as the people controlling the movement? Often the people who controlled the movement also controlled the politics of the locality, or were working on seizing control of that locality. In the Montana territory, Sanders and his Vigilance committee were attempting to control society in Virginia City, Nevada City, and Bannack from 1864-1866.¹⁸⁹ Once they had gained substantial influence they allowed themselves to fade into their shadowy backgrounds. The Vigilantes still tampered with politics in Montana as members of the Republican Party. Brown quoted Dimsdale::

...the contraculture- of the frontier was stated with feeling by Thomas Dimsdale, who cried that "for the low, brutal, cruel, lazy, ignorant, insolent, sensual and blasphemous miscreants that infest the frontier we entertain but one sentiment- a versions- deep, strong and unchangeable."¹⁹⁰

If one were inclined to take this quote out of context of Dimsdale's book, one could be reading a description of Paddy in a Know-Nothing pamphlet. The Irish, as noted earlier,

¹⁸⁹ Malone et al., Montana, 80. The Vigilantes definitely had influence over territorial politics. The vigilantism, Republican Party membership, and Masonic lodge membership seemed to go hand and hand.

¹⁹⁰ Brown, Strain, 108.

were often described in nineteenth century America as ignorant, low, sensual, and blasphemous. Many of the miners who flocked West to look for gold were Irish. The Irish built San Francisco as well as Butte. Brown focused on what he called neo-vigilantism, the vigilantism that emerged in San Francisco in 1856. It was not based on criminal activity; it was based on race, creed and religion. This form of Vigilantism tinged Montana also.

Meagher did not make the Vigilantes his friends. They threatened him twice. He fired one of their most ardent admirers from his job as the Superintendent of Public Instruction. More important, Meagher and Sanders hated each other politically. Meagher may have been killed because he had executive control over the government the Radical Republican Vigilantes wanted to control. He may also have been killed for his Irish-Catholic Democratic stances that did not mesh with Republican Vigilante Protestant views. One cannot prove Meagher was murdered. People, however, perceived that he was murdered. Were the Vigilantes and their leader capable of murder and did they have sufficient motive?

This paper established the political rivalry between Meagher and Sanders. Meagher dreamed that Montana would become a haven for Irish-Catholics. His stance on the public school issue alienated him from Republican support. Meagher's stance was definitely in line with the Democratic Party. This party line was not a popular one in the North immediately after the Civil War. Even after Meagher's death the school issue and the dislike of the Church continued. President Grant saw Catholicism in a negative. He said:

...unless public schools were kept from sectarian influence the nation might face another civil war between the forces of patriotism and intelligence on the one side and superstition and ignorance on the other.¹⁹¹ Meagher's dream would be hard to obtain in a society focused on the elimination of Catholicism. His dream did not fit the picture Sanders had of Montana. Sanders view had to exist on Republican Methodist principles, a view that did not include Irish Catholics.

In the account of Meagher's death, Sanders wanted people to know how much he cared about Meagher as a person. Sanders expressed to his readers that the notion anyone was out to get Meagher was ludicrous and referred to Meagher's fear as a hallucination. "...but General Meagher had no more loyal friends than those in Fort Benton, who solicitously surrounded him in his last hours."¹⁹² One has to ask how political enemies could be such great friends. Sanders' and Meagher's politics were as close as a mountain lion and grizzly would be in fighting over the same kill. Sharing would not be an option. Sanders story was also inconsistent. He wrote that loyal friends were at Meagher's side at all times the night of his death. Yet in the same detailed account, Sanders could not remember who he spoke with when he departed the boat that night. Was it possible that Sanders gave that same man, perhaps a fellow Vigilante, a verbal order to rid the territory of Meagher forever?

As a vigilante, Sanders was capable of homicide even though he would have considered it in the name of justice. Many of his contemporaries admired his actions and

¹⁹¹ Higham, Strangers, 28-29.

¹⁹² H. Sanders, History, 344.

like Dimsdale held him in great esteem. He bragged about the forty to fifty hangings he orchestrated as chief of the Vigilance committee to the Commercial Gazette in Washington, D.C.¹⁹³ He apparently was close friends with Dimsdale and at least revealed his exploits to him in order for Dimsdale to accurately depict the Vigilantes. One should feel somewhat uneasy about Sanders' character. He discussed his experiences almost as to brag about what he did. Yet, human life was lost. War veterans who had to kill **their** enemy often bury the memories and rarely brag about their actions. Sanders painting of Vigilante history reminds me of this heroic imagery that murder is somehow all right if the cause is right. That mentality is dangerous to society especially when powerful men like Sanders have succumbed to it.

The chief of the Vigilantes was not a stranger to death. It could be just coincidence, but Meagher's death was not the only incident where Sanders had contact with a victim of the mighty currents of a river. Sanders also wrote of another death in detail. Did he write of death to wash his hands of guilt? He wrote of Mr. Page, an unknown character in our story except he was traveling with Sanders on this occasion:

Desiring to be where I could render him assistance if he could not make it to the opposite shore, I started up the sandbar...my back was necessarily toward him for a moment, but when I reached the bank and looked and could not see Mr. Page...It was in vain..."¹⁹⁴

¹⁹³ Manuscript 53. "Political dates vary....," WFS., Box 5, Folder 7. MHS.

¹⁹⁴ "Merritt C. Page, 1877, Particulars of His Drowning and Funeral," WFS., MC 53, Box 5, Folder 7. MHS.

Did Sanders attract death or was he just unlucky? No one knows what happened to Mr. Page or Meagher, but Sanders definitely does not seem as perfect as James Brisbin described him to be.

The fact is some people apparently thought that Sanders and the Vigilantes were responsible for Thomas Francis Meagher's death. Father Quigley directly accused them of the act. He was not the only one. In 1913, another story surfaced in Plains, Montana about Meagher's death. A criminal of sorts named Patrick Miller, also known as Frank Diamond, confessed that he killed Meagher. He claimed the Vigilantes paid him eight thousand dollars to put Meagher in his grave. Not long after, he retracted his story. Diamond claimed he must have been delirious to make up such a story.¹⁹⁵

Helen Sanders wrote that the charge that the Vigilantes assassinated Meagher was ridiculous, but then she had a vested interest in protecting Wilbur Fisk of any charge of wrong doing. She questioned the validity of the argument that Meagher was murdered, because the subject had not been brought up earlier. She apparently was either unaware of Father Quigley or chose to ignore his accusation. He made his accusation much earlier than Diamond. Besides, Sanders may not have been suspected by many of his fellow citizens, because he had the reputation of being a hero. People also feared the Vigilantes and did not want to openly expose their suspicions in fear of retaliation. At least, Diamond quickly denied the account after he opened his mouth.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁵ H. Sanders, Montana, 336-7.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

The mystery becomes foggy as more years pass between the time Meagher died and any discussion of what truly happened the night of his death. In 1894 Meagher's name again surfaced in people's thoughts. Montana was in the middle of a war between the Copper Kings. William A. Clark, a Mason, had just defeated Marcus Daly in the fight over where Montana would keep its capitol. Daly wanted the capitol in Anaconda where the majority of his business was and where most of the population was. Clark wanted the capital in Helena to spite Daly.¹⁹⁷ The contest pitted Anaconda against Helena, and Helena won. So what does the capitol fight have to do with Thomas Francis Meagher?

Basically Thomas Francis Meagher would become Marcus Daly's revenge. The Butte Irish established the Thomas Francis Meagher Memorial Association in 1898.¹⁹⁸ The intention of the Association was to raise enough money to erect a statue in Meagher's memory to be placed on the front lawn of the capitol in Helena. Daly was a prominent member of the Association and one of its chief contributors. Emmons asserts the statue of Meagher was conceived as an act of defiance against Clark. Clark would be insulted that Meagher's statue would be placed on the front lawn. Daly would also take this act as a chance to snub Clark who was forever snubbing Daly.¹⁹⁹ One Friday in 1888, Clark decided to have a campaign fundraiser in Anaconda. He naturally invited everyone. He did not exclude anyone. A slight glitch surfaced, however. Clark held the fundraiser on

¹⁹⁷ Malone et al., Montana, 213-214.

¹⁹⁸ Emmons, Butte, 21.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 100. My comment is more general but this page explains some of the ways Daly snubbed Clark and visa versa.

Friday but he served "roasted bullock and fatted calf" for the main course. He did not offer any fish, therefore, excluding any practicing Catholics from participating.²⁰⁰

Clark was also a 33rd degree Mason and a stout Protestant. Daly understood that the statue of Meagher would only fuel Clark's hatred. He also knew it would unite the Irish-Catholics in Montana, because Meagher was perceived as a hero in their eyes.²⁰¹

A hero deserved the best monument money could buy and earning this money was the association's primary goal. An interesting item concerning the statue's funding appeared in one of the Memorial Association's meetings. In the association minutes, the secretary reiterated that the members decided they would not take money from Wilbur Fisk Sanders to build the statue. The Association would have even taken money from Clark, Daly's most hated enemy. Clark probably assisted in destroying Marcus Daly's health due to stress in his later years due to the depth of hatred that ran between the two men. It ran deeper than the copper veins that made Butte the richest hill on earth.

Emmons theorized that the association excluded Wilbur Fisk Sanders for a couple of reasons. First, Sanders had openly supported his fellow Mason, Clark, in the capitol fight. Obviously, a lot of people supported Clark or our state capitol would be in Anaconda. Sanders opposed the idea of free silver. He also did not believe in the exclusion of the Chinese, an obvious threat to Irish jobs.²⁰² One must look at the fact

²⁰⁰ David M. Emmons, "The Orange and the Green in Montana: A Reconsideration of the Clark-Daly Feud," Arizona and the West 28 (Autumn 1986): 240.

²⁰¹ Athearn, Meagher, 26. The Irish admired Meagher as a Irish revolutionary.

²⁰² Emmons, Butte, 119.

other people supported these issues also. A good chance exists that the Association refused Sanders money for another reason: in the back of their minds they believed Sanders was responsible for or directly connected with the death of their hero Thomas Francis Meagher. They apparently did not believe the story that Thomas Francis Meagher jumped from the G.A. Thompson that fateful night in July 1867. Foul play occurred, and Sanders was involved. They refused to dirty their hands with Sanders' money.

The Association disliked Sanders for a lot of reasons, but the rumor mill that Meagher's death was not accidental may have influenced their decision about excluding Sanders. For that matter where did Quigley come up with the story of Meagher's stabbing? As a priest one might be able to assume he was honest man, and he probably would not have written about the murder of Meagher unless he thought the story to be substantiated.

Another strange aspect of this case is that no one really investigated what happened, at least in the information I could find. K. Ross Toole in Montana An Uncommon Land wrote that Meagher was found missing. Officials presumed he drowned. Daylight patrols searched for the body for a day and gave up.²⁰³ Spence called his death an accidental drowning.²⁰⁴

Why was his death not investigated more thoroughly? Meagher, whether anyone liked it or not, was the acting territorial governor at the time. He was a significant public

²⁰³ Toole, Uncommon, 107.

²⁰⁴ Spence, Territorial Politics, 48.

figure, but his death was written off as an accident. Elizabeth Meagher deserved a better explanation of his death.

One may conclude that Meagher did not make many friends in the powerful political arena in Montana. He upset the Republicans at every turn. They had thought Meagher was going to thoroughly support them as a Northern war hero when he arrived. At first Meagher did support them. As noted, Meagher changed his mind about the Republicans and returned to the Democratic party fold. Could Sanders have ordered Meagher's death to put a "quietus to the pretender?"²⁰⁵ It is even possible that Meagher was killed by an overly enthusiastic supporter of Sanders. Too many coincidences and too many rumors existed for Meagher to have simply drowned. The similarity of the Doran and Sanders account comes to mind. People believed he was murdered and that is why the Thomas Francis Meagher Memorial Association refused Sander's money.²⁰⁶

Sanders, in his account of Meagher's death, mentioned that on the G.A. Thompson an Irishman named he thought Dolan questioned him thoroughly about Meagher. "Dolan" had wondered if that was Thomas Francis Meagher, the great Irish revolutionary. Sanders claimed Dolan was quite excited about meeting Meagher. Of course, Sanders appropriately introduced him. Evidence indicates that "Dolan" was actually John T. Doran. Doran knew Meagher prior to Meagher's death. In fact, Captain W.F. Lyons in his book Brigadier General Thomas Francis Meagher gives Doran's account of what happened on that fateful day in July of 1867 in Fort Benton.

²⁰⁵ Letter to Mr. Fergus, 14 February 1866, WFS., Box 3, Folder 5. MHS.

²⁰⁶ Emmons, Butte, 119.

Doran wrote a letter to W.F. Lyons on December 16, 1869 to inform him of the events of Meagher's death and of the day in general. Doran explained to Lyons that he met Meagher after he had escorted Elizabeth Meagher on a boat to the Montana territory to meet her husband in 1866. At that time, he was the pilot of the steamer Ontario.

On July 29th, 1867, according to his letter to Lyons Doran arrived in Fort Benton as the pilot of the steamer, G.A. Thompson. Doran discovered his friend Meagher at Baker's provisional store reading a newspaper. Meagher greeted Doran and told him that Elizabeth was in Helena. He told Doran that they were as "happy as two thrushes in a bush". They continued to have a lengthy conversation with each other and ended up dining together. After dinner, Doran loaned Meagher a book to read. They sat on the deck reading when suddenly Meagher jumped up- fearful. He exclaimed: "Johnny, they threatened my life in that town!!" Meagher continued, explaining that several people noted Doran and himself passing by as they wandered through Fort Benton. Doran tried to calm Meagher and finally convinced him to retire for the night. Doran planned to guard the room and he tried to lock the door. The lock, however was demolished but Doran did not think anything of it because he planned to return immediately.²⁰⁷

Within seconds after leaving, Doran heard a splash and someone yell "MAN OVERBOARD!!". The steamer's engineer informed Doran that it was his friend. Doran, acting quickly, sprinted to the guidon, where the ship carried her flag. He heard two

²⁰⁷ Lyons, Thomas Francis, 351-357.

agonizing screams-- a short one then a long one. The next day, the locals dragged the river and searched the shore for Meagher's body. It was to no avail.²⁰⁸

Sanders' and Doran's accounts are closely related. Yet, they both left important things out. They both claimed to have spent the day with Meagher. Doran never mentioned Sanders.²⁰⁹ Sanders mentioned Doran but as Dolan. Sanders' account appears to have been written in the early 1880's, at least that is when it appeared in the papers of the Montana Pioneers. Doran's account was written only two years after Meagher's death. I have the impression that Sanders read Doran's account before he wrote his own.

I also suggest to my readers that Sanders had been accused of having something to do with Meagher's death or perhaps someone said, "You murdered Meagher and I know for a fact you were in Fort Benton the day he died!!" Sanders had to react. He had to respond to the accusation before it ruined his glorious political career. He needed an alibi. Sanders simply borrowed Doran's account and just embellished the story to make him look like a hero. He told his accusers that Meagher was acting deranged and simply committed suicide. Sanders shifted the doubt to Meagher himself.

There is another item of interest in Doran's account that could substantiate Hugh Quigley's account of Meagher's death. Doran specifically mentioned the screams he heard. They were not screams for help like one would suspect from a drowning victim. One agonizing cry was short; one was long as if Meagher had obtained another kind of wound before he hit the water. Quigley said Meagher was stabbed. A knife wound

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 351.

would cause Meagher to cry out in agony. From this hypotheses, one could conclude Meagher was murdered.

It appears, however, Meagher was a victim of Anti-Catholic forces and an extremely bitter power struggle that pitted the Radical Republicans against Democrats in the Montana territory. The controversy over his death illustrates how deeply political and religious divisions divided Montana as well as America in the nineteenth century.

Historians have overlooked the death of Meagher. They have written it off as accident. Valid points in this paper should reopen their investigation or at least reexamine their conclusions of Meagher's death. They need to review their own notes.

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